

Linguistic variation in Ancient Egyptian:
 An introduction to the state of the art
 (with special attention to the community of Deir el-Medina)*
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In this chapter,¹ I explore different aspects of the variability ‘inherent to human languages’² as it manifests itself in the corpus of pre-Demotic texts³ from Ancient Egypt. More specifically, I adopt a sociolinguistic perspective and describe the types of impact that extra-linguistic⁴ factors have had on the written performance in this specific socio-cultural setting.⁵

Four dimensions of linguistic variation⁶ or, as Coseriu (1980) puts it, four *dia-*dimensions, have long been acknowledged in linguistic studies: the temporal-historical (or *diachronic*) dimension, the spatial-geographical (or *diatopic*) dimension, the social (or *diastratic*) dimension, and the situational (or *diaphasic*) dimension. These dimensions of variation capture the fact that the intrinsic heterogeneity and complexity as well as the evolution of languages are heavily dependent on social contexts.

Traditionally, one considers the temporal dimension to be diachronic in essence whereas the three other types of variation are defined as synchronically oriented. However, this conception is misleading. On the one hand, the temporal dimension may have obvious ‘synchronic’ orientations, e.g., when it comes to explaining variation related to generational effects.⁷ On the other hand, the dynamics of spatial, social and situational variation often

* To Eitan, in remembrance of an improbable year.

¹ I am grateful to Todd Gillen (Liège), Ben Haring (Leiden), Joachim Friedrich Quack (Heidelberg), Baudouin Stasse (Liège), Pascal Vernus (Paris) and Jean Winand (Liège) for their comments and criticisms on first drafts of this paper. Thanks are also due to Andréas Stauder (Basel – Chicago) and Daniel Werning (Berlin), who gave me access to unpublished material. I finally wish to thank warmly the editors, Jennifer Cromwell (Copenhagen) and Eitan Grossman (Jerusalem), as well as the anonymous referees, for their suggestions and improvements to the manuscript.

² Biber (1995, 1), see already Sapir (1921, 147).

³ In this paper, the labels ‘pre-Demotic’ and ‘pre-Coptic’ have a purely chronological meaning, i.e., referring to the written material of Ancient Egypt that predates respectively the appearance of the Demotic and of the Coptic scripts. None of the connotations sometimes linked to the ‘pre-Coptic’ label are implied here (on this point, see Schenkel (1983, II, 11–3) and Loprieno (1995, 371)).

⁴ The question of extra-linguistic motivation for language change in Ancient Egypt has been recently broached by Stauder (2013a) in the introduction of his study focusing on attitudes towards the linguistic past in the Thutmoside inscriptions (i.e., inscriptions written during the first part of the 18th dynasty, ca. 1550–1350 BCE).

⁵ For general considerations about the impact of non-linguistic factors, see Berruto (2010).

⁶ This is why one may legitimately talk, after Labov (1994, 19), of *ordered* heterogeneity.

⁷ To the best of my knowledge, an analysis of generational factors in a given ‘synchronic’ corpus has not been explicitly conducted in Ancient Egyptian linguistics. However, this is one of the side contributions of Sweeney’s (1994) innovative approach to *idiolects* in the Late Ramesside Letters (a corpus of about 60 letters dating from the very end of the 20th dynasty and the beginning of the Third Intermediate Period, i.e. ca. 1100 BCE) in comparing the styles of Dhutmose and Butehamon, two scribes of the Necropolis who were father and son.

mirrors language change in progress, i.e., the diachronic dimension⁸ (this is called the *Labov Principle*⁹). Therefore, for each ‘synchronic’ corpus,¹⁰ one can adopt a multidimensional approach to variation that includes, at least, the four aforementioned parameters.

This chapter is structured as follows. After a general presentation of the type of linguistic data and metadata at our disposal when applying sociolinguistic methods to Ancient Egyptian (§1), I first turn to the elusive dimensions of variation related to the language users, i.e., the scribes, in the pre-Demotic textual material, namely the diatopic and diastratic dimensions (§2). In a second step, the much more salient types of variation pertaining to the situation of use (the diaphasic dimension) are examined, with a discussion of the notion of genres and registers as they relate to Ancient Egyptian practices (§3). Finally, I focus on a very specific socio-cultural environment, the community of Deir el-Medina, which was in charge of royal tomb building during the New Kingdom (§4). The goal is to describe the effects, in terms of variation, that this very specific socio-cultural environment had on the language of the written productions emanating from its community.

§1. *Ancient Egyptian: available types of data and metadata*

If one accepts that it is not possible to describe a whole language with the limited set of textual information at our disposal, Ancient Egyptian data are not ‘bad’ for variationist analyses, but they do need problematizing.¹¹ In this section, the methodological implications of dealing with a highly formal *text language*¹² are discussed first (§1.1). This is followed by a brief discussion of the quantity and type of linguistic data (and metadata) at our disposal in pre-Demotic Egyptian.

⁸ This idea is now becoming trivial due to the spread of grammaticalization studies. In Egyptological linguistics, see already the comments made by Loprieno (1994, 370–1) about the ‘need to recognize the “trace” of history within any synchronic stage of the language.’

⁹ See also Givón’s (2002, 19–20) comparison with synchronic variations within a biological population. In this vein, methods of historical sociolinguistics enable us to dynamicize synchronic models of variation, just as ‘diachronic typology “dynamicizes” the extant synchronic model by reinterpreting synchronic languages states as stages in a diachronic process,’ Croft, Denning, & Kemmer (1990, XIII). This perspective has been adopted by Winand (1992) in his study of verbal morphology in Late Egyptian.

¹⁰ Historical sociolinguistics is not diachronic in essence; it may deal with motivated linguistic variations in ‘synchronic’ corpora of the past, see, e.g., Bergs (2005, 12). Moreover, considering the dimensions of variation synchronically – because they behave independently with respect to the speed and types of evolution depending on internal variables – appears to be a prerequisite to sound diachronic studies that focus on the evolution of the language as a whole.

¹¹ The ‘unpredictable series of historical accidents’ leading to uneven corpora, the ‘normative’ nature of written varieties (and distortion imposed on the varieties by the medium), as well as the impossibility of confirming negative evidence (gaps in the documentation are definitely unequal to statements of ungrammaticality), explain Labov’s (1994, 11) pessimistic statement about historical linguistics which he considers to be ‘the art of making the best use out of bad data’. Several scholars have taken this remark at face value, recently see *inter alii* Beal 2008. A refreshing counter-perspective is offered by Bergs and Stenroos (both in the current volume), arguing that the data are excellent for whoever is inclined to ask questions they can answer.

¹² The notion of *text languages* (also discussed in Stenroos’ contribution to this volume, Chapter 2) was coined by Fleischman (2000, 34) in order ‘to reflect the fact that the linguistic activity of such languages is amenable to scrutiny only insofar as it has been constituted in the form of extant *texts* [...]. [...] the data corpus of a text language is finite [...]’.

§1.1. *Methodological remarks about Ancient Egyptian as a text language*

As a text language, Ancient Egyptian is certainly not best described in relation to any kind of spoken vernacular, but should be studied as written performance in its own right.¹³ The impression of having access to written-as-if-spoken Ancient Egyptian is essentially an illusion¹⁴ that ignores the demarcation between written and spoken realms.¹⁵ These two independent semiotic universes deserve methodologies that are distinct, even if comparable (because of the fact that they ultimately represent the same language).¹⁶

This rather uncontroversial statement holds for any language, but is of paramount importance in the cultural environment of Ancient Egypt. As a matter of fact, *l'espace de l'écrit* is characterized by a strong tendency towards a very high degree of formality¹⁷ that ensues from converging cultural and sociological factors:¹⁸ documents from Ancient Egypt can be organized on a graded continuum of sacralisation,¹⁹ which is indexed by artefactual²⁰

¹³ See already the remarks in Baines & Eyre (1989, 103–4). This is much in agreement with Kammerzell (1998, 21–3) who argues that spoken Egyptian and written Egyptian may be considered as two distinct linguistic systems since they show marked differences on all levels of linguistic description.

¹⁴ See, for example, Allen (1994, 1), in reference to the letters of Heqanakht that are ‘generally understood to represent what Middle Egyptian must have been like as a spoken language’. Another enduring myth is the conception of Late Egyptian documentary texts as a low variety directly reflecting the spoken vernacular of the time, see below. In Egyptian linguistics, the labels ‘colloquial’, ‘spoken’, and ‘vernacular’ have been used as near synonyms to refer to the registers of some texts, texts varieties, sub-corpora or genres, according to two usually – but not necessarily – co-occurring principles: (1) the function of the text has to be anchored in daily life (letters, administrative documents such as account, court reports, etc.), and (2) formal features characteristic of later stages of the language occur in the text (the functional dimension of these formal features is usually downplayed). Against this position, it is argued here that the written language is inevitably levelled in different ways – no matter how close its function to daily life and how numerous the innovative features – and is better not evaluated against a virtual spoken variety, even less so when it is seen as a coherent and monolithic variety with a linear diachronic evolution. Additionally, innovative linguistic features access the numerous written registers through complex processes of legitimization (granted by the power-holders, by the competing elite or by the scribal intelligentsia itself). These aspects, which inevitably involve drastic selections in the spoken repertoire, are broached in Goldwasser (1999, 312–3 and 316–7). Conversely, some written varieties may be the very locus of innovation (the relation between spoken and written varieties is far from being unidirectional, see e.g., Chafe & Tannen (1987)): some changes may originate in the written medium directly (and spread afterwards, if ever, to the spoken one; see Smith (1996, 15–7)); one can simply think of literary findings, documentary idioms (e.g., in legal texts) or even complete registers (e.g., of the *égyptien de tradition*, see n. 21) which most certainly never occurred in the spoken medium.

¹⁵ This does not quite mean, of course, that parts of the spoken registers may not be reflected in writing, see, e.g., the case of quoted discourses and slang idioms in the Tomb Robberies papyri mentioned by Vernus (1993) and Winand (Chapter 5 in this volume). In this respect, the linguistic differences between the registers of narratives and discourses are particularly striking, both registers showing different patterns of variation in a single text and having distinct speeds of evolution.

¹⁶ See Goldwasser’s (1999, 312) insightful comments.

¹⁷ The notion of formality is well established in sociolinguistic theories (e.g., Bergs (2005, 18)), but it is not unproblematic, see already Halliday (1978, 224). It has been recently used in Egyptological linguistics by Stauder (2013a, especially n. 20).

¹⁸ See below the comments about literacy, access to writing, and the status of the scribe in §2.2.

¹⁹ See Vernus (1990, 41–3) and his distinction between documents that are ‘sacralisés’ and those ‘qui ne le sont point’; ‘[l]a sacralisation est le terme marqué de cette opposition, ce qui veut dire que les documents sacralisés ont des marques positives qui les classent comme tels, alors que les documents non sacralisés n’ont pas de marques spéciales.’

²⁰ E.g., the type of medium (from the most enduring ones, such as monuments, to the most temporary ones, such as ostraca), or the link with the iconic sphere (complementarities and interaction with pictures and, crucially, the use of the hieroglyphic script which bears the capacity to refer figuratively to the essence of things).

parameters. This continuum of sacralisation combines in complex ways with linguistic features²¹ that range from greater vernacularity to greater formality.²²

It should be stressed that the ‘vernacular’ registers²³ have no characteristics that make them more interesting than other more formal registers for linguistic studies.²⁴ Paraphrasing Stenroos (Chapter 2, this volume), every register displays patterns of variation that are strictly patterns of written convention and deserve to be analysed as such. No register has ontological qualities that make it better suited for linguistic analysis on account of being closer to the spoken language.²⁵ Due to the overall cultural context of written production, we may assume that even the text varieties situated at the bottom of the formality scale (i.e., those closest to the written ‘vernacular’ pole) have few features and types of variations in common with spoken Ancient Egyptian. If generalizations about the relationship between written data and spoken language – or, better, varieties – have to be made, they belong to a second stage of analysis.²⁶

§1.2. *Linguistic data and metadata about texts in pre-Demotic Egyptian*

The linguistic data at our disposal are very limited in terms of quantity when compared to modern corpora – very roughly, some 2.5 million tokens for pre-Demotic Egyptian. Apart from the discovery of new written material, the set of data is closed, and we can unfortunately not elicit additional data from dead speakers. As such, whatever the type of variation under investigation may be, restrictions apply to the use of quantitative analysis, an important tool of contemporary sociolinguistics.²⁷ The problem is not in producing quantitative data, but in their lack of significance. Except for large-scale diachronic phenomena, mostly irrelevant in the perspective adopted here, the low token frequencies of variables and their highly unequal distribution across types often make the use of statistics meaningless (because of random distributions on which no generalization can be made). Given the low density of linguistic material and the correlatively high diversity of registers (as well as their disparity across

²¹ At the linguistic level, it does not only involve the selection of formal and standardized registers at a given point in time (see Fig. 4.2 below), but – given the postulated relation between language and essences in Ancient Egypt – the use of a linguistic variety (called *égyptien de tradition* after Vernus (1978, 139 n. 136; 1982, 18 and 81)) that aims at imitating and emulating, ideologically at least, the language of the First Time (*zp tpy*) and, in practical terms, parts of the Earlier Egyptian repertoire. With time, this led to a genuine diglossia between written registers (the literature is abundant, see e.g., Jansen-Winkel (1995), Loprieno (1996), and Vernus (1996)). I would, however, favour the term ‘multiglossia’, which is familiar to scholars of Arabic, in order to refer to the continuum of registers; see §3.2.2. We still lack a comprehensive description of the language ideologies, defined, following Silverstein (1979, 193), as ‘sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure or use’, prevalent in Ancient Egypt. The identification of evaluative attitudes held by writers is an important requisite when dealing with variation and conventionalization (see especially Ferguson (1994, 18; 25–6)), for they play a crucial role in the diachronic spread of certain features at the expense of others.

²² See Bergs (2005, 18).

²³ Their description has been distinctly favoured in grammatical studies of Late Egyptian. The nature of the Earlier Egyptian corpus made this option impossible.

²⁴ A similar observation applies to the distinction between dialects and standard languages, which is a by-product of social, historical, and cultural factors: ‘from a merely linguistic point of view there is no difference between standard and dialect’ (Berruto (2010, 231)). In the same vein, see already Hudson (1996, 36) who argues that there is no distinction to be drawn except with reference to prestige, which is impossible to define based on linguistic features.

²⁵ *Contra*, see, e.g., Černý & Groll (1993, XLIX–L).

²⁶ It is evidently the case when it comes to the phonological level of analysis; see Peust (1999, 19).

²⁷ On methodological issues in quantitative sociolinguistics, see e.g. the conclusions of Bailey & Tillery (2004).

periods), any quantitative approach to Ancient Egyptian is therefore profitably supplemented by a qualitative one, which evaluates actual number of occurrences against an ‘expected’ body of evidence²⁸ in order to offset the vagaries of preservation. As discussed in §1.1, the data are also limited in terms of quality,²⁹ since the written medium mostly gives access to levelled or standardized varieties, or ‘normative dialects’ in Labovian terminology.³⁰

Second, metadata are often lacking,³¹ making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the dating of texts³² and to assess the exact status of scribes and authors, when we are lucky enough to know their names. What is their place of origin?³³ What is the social structure of the community they lived in and their actual position therein for each period?³⁴ These issues are addressed in §2 and further illustrated in §4, when discussing the exceptional case of the Deir el-Medina community.

§2. *Dimensions of variation related to the users (scribes)*

Two dimensions of linguistic variation are reflections of reasonably permanent characteristics of the ‘social man’, i.e., the language user, in any linguistic situation:³⁵ the geographical (diatopic) and social (diastratic) dimensions. These dimensions are merged in every single text, which is by definition the product of a scribe who both originates from a particular place and lives in a particular social *milieu*. In other words, the separation between the two dimensions is a convenient abstraction that allows the analysis to focus on specific aspects.³⁶ For argument’s sake, the local tradition in the Coffin Texts spells from Deir el-Bersha represents a clear case of diatopic variation, while the evolution of draughtsmen’s writings during the New Kingdom can be envisioned as a diastratic one.

§2.1. *The diatopic dimension*

The diatopic dimension has attracted the attention of many scholars. Within this dimension, two main trends of research have been pursued: the identification of local varieties³⁷ *per se*

²⁸ This issue is discussed extensively in Stauder (2013b).

²⁹ Vernus (1994, 330) clearly draws the attention of the Egyptological community to this fact: ‘[f]aute d’informateur, nous ne disposons que d’un registre plus ou moins étendu d’énoncé qui ne reflète pas nécessairement toutes les variétés théoriquement possibles’.

³⁰ See, for example, Nevalainen, Klemola & Laitinen (2006, 16–7).

³¹ For this, see especially Nevalainen (1999).

³² The question becomes especially vexing when it comes to dating literary texts. See recently Moers et al. (2013) and Stauder (2013b).

³³ Place is understood here both as location, in objective physical terms, and as meaning, an idealization of the physical resulting from a social construct; see Johnstone (2004). The second dimension is most certainly the determinant in the case studied by Uljas (2010), which shows that the region in which an individual is born is part of his social identity.

³⁴ This was underlined by Funk (1988, 151) concerning the Coptic dialects.

³⁵ I refer explicitly to Halliday’s viewpoint in his chapters (1978, 8–35 & 211–35) entitled *Language and the social man* (parts 1 and 2), where he states (p. 12) that ‘language and society – or, as we prefer to think of it, language and social man – is a unified conception, and needs to be understood and investigated as a whole. Neither of these exists without the other: there can be no social man without language, and no language without social man’.

³⁶ Both dimensions are obviously always pregnant: every place has some social ‘depth’ and one may be interested in the repertoire of a social group scattered in several places.

³⁷ For the suggestions that have been put forward, see the literature quoted in Peust (1999, 33 n. 15); add Vycichl (1958); Davis (1973, 168–202); Osing (1975); Meltzer (1980); Leahy (1981); Doret (1986, 14 n. 24), with previous literature; Allen (2004); Kammerzell (2005); Peust (2007); Gundacker (2010). See also the numerous

and the investigation of possible correlations between macro-diachronic stages and regions of Egypt where the written ‘standard’ variety of a given period might originate. From this perspective, the ‘standard’ written language of one period is seen as predominantly reflecting a geographic dialect.³⁸

Most of the local varieties that one may reasonably assume to have existed, given the considerable north-south extension of the country,³⁹ are elusive in pre-Coptic Ancient Egyptian. In the present state of affairs, ‘[i]t has been almost impossible to find clear linguistic characteristics typical for a specific geographical region’.⁴⁰ The only convincing case of diatopic variation that has been identified so far is the Napatian Egyptian dialect,⁴¹ attested by a small set of royal inscriptions in the northern half of the Sudan (5th to 3rd centuries BCE). This dialect shows morphological and syntactic variations that diverge strikingly from the written norm of similar registers attested in Egypt at the same period.

None of the hypotheses correlating macro-diachronic stages of pre-Coptic Ancient Egyptian with a standard variety coming from one particular part of Egypt has proven to be entirely persuasive.⁴² This is reflected most immediately by the lack of agreement between scholars. If one puts Demotic aside, Old, Middle, and Late Egyptian have all been linked in turn to Lower, Middle, and Upper Egypt, depending on the linguistic features scholars paid attention to. Definitely more promising are the approaches that identify *diaglosses* between texts coming from specific geographical areas at different stages of the language and that focus on some linguistic features without overgeneralization.⁴³ In-depth studies of this kind appear to be a prerequisite for further generalizations.

features that are explained based on dialectal, i.e., diatopic, variation in Allen (2013, see *indices*). The suggested patterns of variation are generally relevant, but their matching with a place is often not conclusive: the number of texts considered is small (e.g. Johnson (1977)), the argument disputable (e.g. Davis (1973, 168–202)) or the phenomenon under investigation at the fringes and inaccurately described (e.g. Groll (1987); compare Shisha-Halevy’s (2007a) thorough investigation of determination-signalling environments).

³⁸ This position is convenient when it comes to explaining the quick emergence of a given linguistic feature; however, the argument is generally *ad hoc*. See, e.g., Meltzer (1990, 75).

³⁹ Cf. the famous sentence of *P.Anastasi I*, 28,6: *st mi md.t n s idh.w hn s n 3bw* ‘they [i.e. your stories] are like the talk of a man from the Delta with a man of Elephantine’ with Loprieno’s (1982, 76–7) critical comments. See also Greenberg (1986, 505), commenting on the differing local dialects in Ancient Egypt.

⁴⁰ Peust (1999, 33).

⁴¹ See Peust (1999b) (with Quack (2002) regarding the similarities with Demotic); Breyer (2008) rejects the label ‘dialect’, arguing that Napatian is better characterized as ‘eine Art hyperkreolisierte Schriftsprache’. For earlier material (early Third Intermediate Period), see Darnell (2006) on Queen Katimala’s inscription with the critical reviews and papers by Zibelius-Chen (2007) and Collombert (2008).

⁴² The divergent suggestions are summed up in Peust (1999a, 33 n. 15), with the previous literature on the topic. See now also Stauder (2013b, 6 n. 11). Note that Edgerton’s (1951b) identification of Old and Late Egyptian with northern varieties was more recently joined by Allen (2004, 6–7), based on the analysis of the prothetic verbal forms in the Middle Kingdom versions of the Pyramid Texts: the more northern the texts, the more frequent the prothetic *yod*. On the other hand, Allen (2004, 7–10) argues for a southern origin of Middle Egyptian, given the occurrence of the negation *nn*, characteristic of Middle Egyptian, instead of *nj* in the Middle and Lower Egypt versions of Pyramid Text spells during the Middle Kingdom. Based on other features, the opposite position also has advocates; see, e.g., Schenkel (1993: 146–9), with previous literature.

⁴³ See, e.g., Shisha-Halevy (1981), who discusses the degree of similarity between Late Egyptian and Bohairic, exploring ‘descriptive similarities of grammatical entities’; Winand (1992, 502–4), between Upper Egypt and Akhmimic Late Egyptian constructions of the Third Future with nominal subject (see now also Vernus (2013, 22–5) regarding this construction, and other possible Akhmimic features, in the *Teaching of Amenemope*); Winand (2007, 302–3 and 2011, 547 and 550), between *The Tale of Wenamun* and Coptic dialects from Upper Egypt (Sahidic excluded) concerning the compatibility of the relative converter with the perfective *sdm=f* and the past converter *wn*; Vernus suggested (pers. comm.) that, given the temporal proximity of *Wenamun* and the

This apparent lack of significant geographic variation⁴⁴ points to the need for detailed analyses that envision all the possible dimensions of variation⁴⁵ and take into consideration the evanescent metadata concerning the place of origin of the authors of texts.⁴⁶ Indeed, combined sociological and cultural factors (see §2.2) lead to a high degree of standardization (or normalization⁴⁷) of the written performance at any stage of the Egyptian language.⁴⁸ Dialectal variables therefore are evidently not numerous and mostly to be found at the fringes of the attested registers: there can be no doubt that the dialectal study of pre-Coptic Egyptian is still in its infancy.

§2.2. *The diastratic dimension*

The social (or diastratic) dimension of variation is not more self-evident than the diatopic one.⁴⁹ In both cases, this appears to follow directly from the way Ancient Egyptians conceived of their national identity and from the ideology maintaining their sense of community. The Ancient Egyptian language – and more specifically the mastery of reading and writing it – was a component of paramount importance in the construction of this identity and ‘must have come close to being the qualifying test for Egyptianness’.⁵⁰ In this context, the knowledge of cursive and hieroglyphic writing was integral, even if it remained chiefly the prerogative of a scribal elite dependent on various administrative and religious institutions and, ultimately, on the central state. Consequently, the social dimension of variation is limited due to at least two parameters.

Teaching of Amenemope, ‘de très maigres manifestations de variétés locales pourraient déjà être reconnues frémissantes dès le début de la Troisième Période Intermédiaire’. This observation fits well with a progressive opening of the written registers to diatopic variation, a dimension which is definitely identifiable in the Demotic corpus (Quack, pers. comm.).

⁴⁴ Even if it falls outside of the scope of the present paper, it is worth mentioning that the situation in Coptic is somewhat different given that ‘geographical distance is the most powerful factor behind the range of variation in Coptic as a whole’ (Funk (1988, 152)). The non-defective writing system has allowed scholars to identify several ‘dialects’ (see e.g. Kasser (1991)). It is not the place here to enter the debate regarding the exact nature of the variations at stake behind the graphical level, i.e., whether it actually reflects regional linguistic variation at the phonological level or merely different ways and norms of transcribing the same language according to the place where a text has been written (for the latter option, see especially Loprieno (1992)). In any event, morphological and syntactical distinctions between dialects have been fruitfully identified; see, e.g., Polotsky (1960); Shisha-Halevy (2007b) for the peculiarities of the Bohairic dialect; Grossman (2009) about the grammaticalization of periphrastic perfects in the Coptic dialects and Grossman & Polis (forthcoming) about the prohibitive constructions across dialects.

⁴⁵ In this respect, it seems methodologically unsound to assume that one or two linguistic features in common between ‘dialects’ may be sufficient to equate an entire stage of the language with another. Additionally, the grammatical consonances usually occur between specific corpora displaying similar patterns of variation and not between idealized and linguistically heterogeneous stages of Ancient Egyptian (this fact was already mentioned in Doret (1986, 14 n. 24)). Here, Shisha-Halevy’s statement about Coptic (1981, 314) could be profitably extended to pre-Coptic Egyptian; ‘there is really no justification, either syn- or diachronic, descriptive or comparative, for tackling Coptic *en bloc* as a monolithic phenomenon, previous to examining its components’. Here, I deliberately cast aside as a premature enterprise the further attempt to match one stage of the language with an actual geographical area.

⁴⁶ For example, of the type produced by Uljas (2010) in his study of the writings of the 3rd person plural suffix pronoun =*sn* without the final -*n* in Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate period inscriptions.

⁴⁷ Regarding the spectrum of Coptic literary dialects, Funk (1988, 151) speaks of ‘normalized texts’.

⁴⁸ On this point, see recently the pessimistic (but quite realistic) view expressed by Loprieno (2006, 167) concerning the identification of dialectal features in the Deir el-Medina documentation.

⁴⁹ Loprieno (2006, 168) uses the label ‘diastratic’ for referring to what is called ‘diaphasic’ variation in the present paper.

⁵⁰ Kemp (2006, 34).

The first applies also to other dimensions of variation, but is worth describing more explicitly in relation to sociological variation. Writing is an instrument of knowledge,⁵¹ and knowledge an instrument of power.⁵² As such, written performance was in the grip of a closed group of individuals at the top of the social hierarchy and, undoubtedly, subject to control; it was situated within a complex system of conventions⁵³ imposing restrictions on the written language.⁵⁴ In linguistic terms, this led *ipso facto* to a limitation of the space for socially motivated variation: each Ancient Egyptian genre was linked to registers (see §3.1–2 below), which were conventionalized to a degree hardly reached by any other text language. As mentioned earlier, this conventionalization of registers can be conceived of as a scale⁵⁵ ranging from greater vernacularity to greater formality. Assuming four ideal registers, this may be schematized as follows:⁵⁶

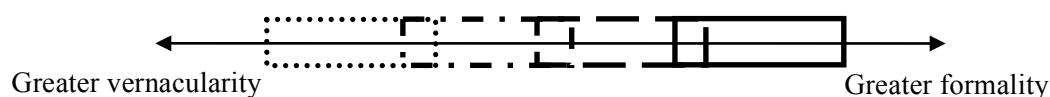


Fig. 4.1. Scale of formality of the written registers

Even if the situation varied quite a bit over the course of history,⁵⁷ the proportion of literate individuals among the whole Egyptian population most certainly remained close to *one per cent* of the total adult population in pre-Demotic times.⁵⁸ Literacy, understood as a social practice,⁵⁹ was the prerogative of a small group of individuals, a scribal elite occupying a position of prestige. This community of knowledge and writing⁶⁰ was always prone to self-promotion through iconic and textual representations; scribes shared values and interests, and, accordingly, acted as a highly cohesive group in the social stratification. In their writings, this

⁵¹ See Baines (1990, 9–10) and Vernus (1990, 37). In the framework of this paper, it is enough to quote the famous idiom *sšt3 n mdw-ntr* ‘the secret of the hieroglyphs’.

⁵² On this point, see Baines (1990, 6–10; 2007, 146–71) who problematizes the opposition between oral and written knowledge and its distribution among the literate elite. On the subversive uses of speech in the literary texts, see Coulon (1999).

⁵³ The lexicon referring to the language of literature is itself tinged with axiological values (*md.wt nfr.wt* ‘the good words’, *t3s.w štp.w* ‘the chosen maxims’, etc.); see the examples quoted by Moers (2002).

⁵⁴ See Junge (2001, 18) and also Loprieno (2006, 167), who provides two examples ‘in which writing conventions torpedo the recognition of dialectal, and to a certain extent even of linguistic realities altogether’.

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Bergs (2005, 18).

⁵⁶ This description of the written registers may be compared with Milroy’s ‘structured varieties’ (1992, 66).

⁵⁷ See Baines & Eyre (1983, 67–9).

⁵⁸ Baines & Eyre (1983, 67) suggest a rate of literacy of one per cent (highest estimate) for the Old Kingdom, but they think that it might have been higher for other periods. This estimation (which is disputed by Lesko (1990) without much argument) may be compared with Harris’ evaluation (1989, 328) of the degree of literacy in classical Athens: five per cent (or possibly a bit more) of the total adult population. This percentage was to rise to 10–15 per cent in the next centuries. Quack (2006, 95–8), based on his work on the *Book of the Temple* (especially the number of hands) and taking into account various degrees of literacy (people working periodically for temples, etc.), argues that, at least in urban areas, a high percentage of the male adult population must have been literate during the later periods.

⁵⁹ On this point, see Barton & Hamilton’s introduction (1998, 1–22). Literacy is described as integral to its social context and may be accessed through literacy practices linked to social institutions and power relationships.

⁶⁰ See Ragazzoli (2010, 158).

is reflected by the conformity to norms acquired both through teaching and scribal practices,⁶¹ conventions probably often best understood as an implicit or tacit agreement within the group of literates than as a proper prescriptive standard.⁶² To put it otherwise, the mastering of the linguistic norm attached to each conventionalized register was indexical of their belonging to the upper class.⁶³ Therefore, one may refine the schema of Fig. 4.1 by adding a second dimension, a continuum ranging from greater variation to greater standardization.

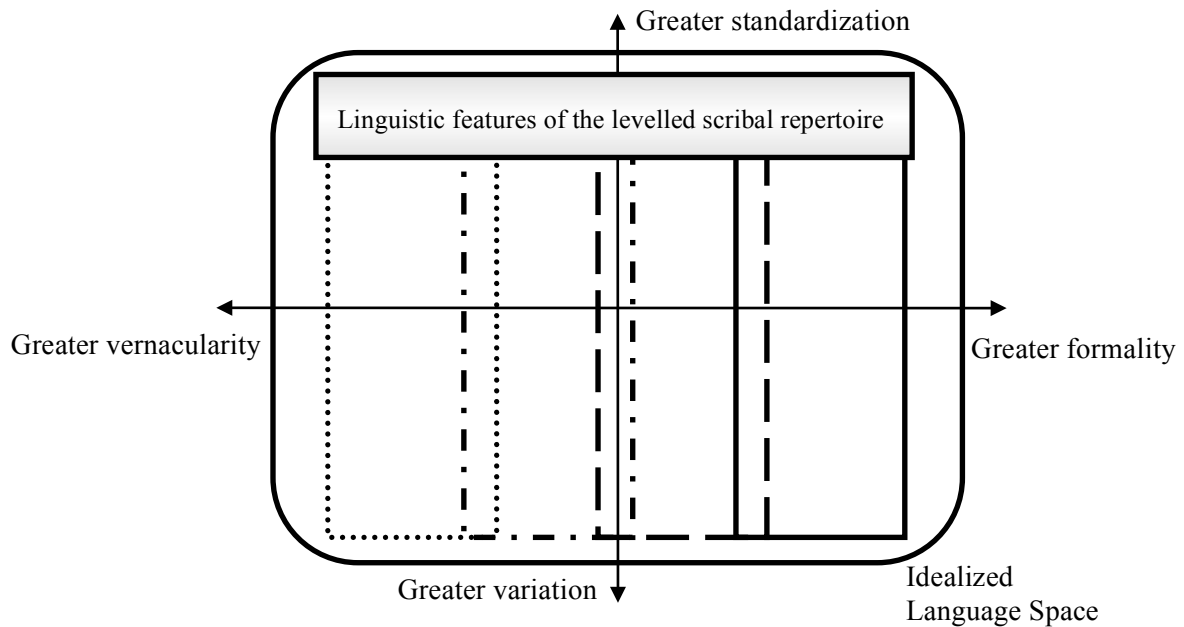


Fig. 4.2. The linguistic features of the levelled scribal repertoire

⁶¹ This assertion does not take sides on the question of the existence of centralized teaching in Ancient Egypt (see the well-known sentence in the *Instruction of Kheti* [P. Sallier II, 3,9–4,1] referring to ‘a scribal school in the midst of the children of the officials and the foremost of the Residence’ and the comments in McDowell (2000, 217–8)): the scribal practices and the assumed mobility of individual scribes are self-sufficient in explaining the emergence of levelled written registers. However, one should not downplay the influence of teaching, centralized or local, in reinforcing the convention attached to registers in the direction of greater normalization, especially during the New Kingdom when the ‘Classics’ of earlier times were learned and copied at school. See, e.g., Junge (2001, 21). On scribal education, see Brunner (1957), as well as ‘Erzieher’ and ‘Erziehung’ in *LdÄ* II, 20–2 and 22–7. On the first steps of scribal training (writing exercises [from individual signs to the copying of whole sentences], grammatical paradigms, onomastic lists, etc.), see Venturini (2007). On scribal education during the Ramesside period, see the relevant observations in Hagen (2006, about the Miscellanies, and 2007), and Goelet (2008), with previous literature.

⁶² See Ferguson’s definition of ‘conventionalization’ (1994, 15): ‘Human language [...] is nevertheless largely a matter of convention, that is an implicit contract among a community of users of a language variety that certain expressions will mean certain things when used in combinations under certain social conditions. Just how this ‘contract’ is constantly being achieved, maintained, and changed is the problem of conventionalization.’ There always seems to be ‘an expected norm for any single utterance, and any deviance from this expected norm is of interest to the sociolinguist and the student of language change’ (Bergs (2005, 18)); see also Croft’s *Theory of Utterance Selection* (2000, 31).

⁶³ If we understand it correctly, the most famous declaration of Montuwerer (St. MMA 12.184) is definitely symptomatic of this fact: *ink mdw r r-^c sr.w, šwy m dd p3w* ‘I was someone speaking like the officials, free from saying *p3w*’ (literature in Stauder (2013a, n. 36)). This would be a clear case of *first order indexicality* in Silverstein’s terminology, i.e., the association by a social actor of a linguistic form with some meaningful social group, the officials.

This two-dimensional graph delimits what might be labelled as an idealized ‘language space’, a theoretical construct encompassing all the linguistic features likely to be actualized by a scribe at any given point in time. Due to the sociological factors acknowledged above, the scribal repertoire, i.e., the sum of written forms available for the scribe, is, however, limited to tightly levelled registers,⁶⁴ which usually lack significant linguistic variation. This lack of variation, in turn, reflects the sociological context of production.

Fig. 4.2 shows that a given register may be low on the formality scale, e.g., the content of a letter, but will nevertheless display a considerable degree of regularity.⁶⁵ Therefore, the Egyptian language we access through writing is, to gloss Bourdieu, an object ideologically pre-constructed by a set of socio-historical conditions: the scribal repertoire of the extant documentation is close enough to what Heinz Kloss labelled ‘*Dachsprache*’,⁶⁶ if we understand this term as referring to the continuum of levelled registers whose prestige succeeds in obscuring those dimensions of variation that are related to the user.

So far, the identification of diastatic variation in pre-Demotic Egyptian has not been a successful enterprise. The issues that we are facing in this domain may be illustrated by Sweeney’s (1995) case study. She investigated whether Ancient Egyptian women used language differently from men in non-literary letters from the Ramesside Period and tried to identify ‘genderlectal’ features. Her results are mostly negative: ‘what women have in common with each other linguistically, they also have in common with men, by and large. Almost all the morphological and syntactic elements which appear in women’s letters also appear in those of men.’ Interestingly, from a methodological viewpoint, the author noticed some peculiarities in the phrasing of *Late Ramesside Letter* no. 37, sent by the chantress of Amun Henuttawy, which is less ‘standardized’ than other letters. However, the infrequent linguistic features that appear in this document seem to point rather to an individual style (idiolect) than to a proper genderlect, for they do not occur in other letters sent by women.

Finally, a note by Gilula (1991) regarding the king’s Egyptian in the tale of *P. Westcar* will serve here as a bridge between the diastatic and the diaphasic dimensions of variation. While studying two sentences with ‘majestic licence’ uttered by the King, Gilula argues that they may reflect ‘a level of speech that is higher than that of common people and might indicate special breeding, erudition or sensitivity to the language and its eccentric usage.’ This observation is certainly valid,⁶⁷ but one should not be tempted to correlate it with the actual position of the King at the top of the social hierarchy. We are dealing with a literary text and

⁶⁴ The notion of ‘levelling’ is preferred here as a cover term to the under-theorized concept of ‘standardization’. Following Milroy (2004, 162–5), ‘levelling’ may be described as a linguistic process ‘that has the effect of reducing variability both within and across language systems and which in principle operates independently of an institutional norm’, but does not exclude it. The result of this process is ‘levelled registers’. ‘Standardization’, on the other hand, is the marked term, for it typically displays an orientation to an institutionally supported norm. Levelled registers may therefore be the result of various types of agentivity: authorization from the power-holders, cohesive norms of the scribal elite, etc.

⁶⁵ This analysis is somewhat different from, but compatible with, Goldwasser’s (1999, 312–4) description of the language of the Ramesside Period. She accounted for the existence of two main ‘social dialects’, both comprising the Standard variety (i.e., occupying the top of the standardization scale in the present approach): the first, her ‘Low variety’, is the one attested in the non-literary corpus, whereas the second, the ‘High variety’, occurs in literary texts.

⁶⁶ The notion of koineization might be relevant to describe the evolution of language (inflectional reduction, avoidance of syntactic redundancy, etc.) attested in the documentary text of the Ramesside period (19th–20th dynasties), but this hypothesis – proposed by Goldwasser (1999, 314) – remains to be investigated.

⁶⁷ For ‘poetic licence’ induced in documentary texts by the topic dealt with, see Goldwasser (2001).

the kinds of variation observed show mostly, if not solely, that the author and scribe who wrote down this piece on papyrus was able to play in a masterly fashion with the written registers at his disposal, depending on the character.

§3. *Dimension of variation related to the use or diaphasic dimension*

If we had to acknowledge the elusiveness of the dimensions of variation related to the user in the previous section (§2), types of variation related to the use (i.e., the diaphasic dimension of variation) are much more salient in pre-Demotic Egyptian.⁶⁸ This results directly from two related parameters: the high degree of conventionalization of the registers (see §3.2) attached to each genre, and the sizeable differences in the distribution of the linguistic features between registers. In Ancient Egyptian, the overwhelming regularity of correlation between genres and registers is especially striking. Each written performance (genres are *practices*) was linked to well-defined, often prescribed, registers.⁶⁹ In other words, paraphrasing Berruto (2010), linguistic variation according to registers is an indirect reflection of the recurrent characteristics of the way the scribes used the language according to the situation of writing.⁷⁰

The investigation of this dimension of variation has been far and away the most fruitful in variationist accounts of pre-Demotic Egyptian.⁷¹ For the sake of clarity, and given the lack of agreement on the definition of these terms,⁷² the relations between the notions of genre and register need first to be clarified⁷³ (§3.1–3).

§3.1. *Genre*

The notion of genre is not seen here as referring directly to language *varieties* associated with particular situations of use or specific communicative purposes. ‘Genre’ is the reflex of social practices and can be envisioned as an analytical abstraction⁷⁴ based on the structural regularities of the written production depending on the situation of use.⁷⁵ The form of the written performance within a culture (the structure of a text, including phenomena such as versification, register selection, etc.) is constrained by socially shared organizational

⁶⁸ See Ferguson’s (1983, 154) general statement: ‘register variation, in which language structure varies in accordance with the occasion of use, is all-pervasive in human language. Biber (1995, 1–2) adds: ‘Although linguistic differences among geographic and social dialect have been more extensively studied, it turns out that the linguistic differences among the registers within a language are in many ways more noteworthy’.

⁶⁹ This is immediately dependent on the socio-cultural settings of the written performance (see §2.2).

⁷⁰ Berruto (2010, 228). On this point, see Goldwasser (1999, 314–5): ‘the use of the different language varieties is in no way arbitrary, but prescribed; the choice of linguistic and lexical items within the literary dialect is usually conditioned by the required registers of language in every single linguistic situation’.

⁷¹ See Goldwasser (1990, 1991, and 2001), in which numerous theoretical insights are to be found; Junge (2001, 18–23), who stresses the importance of the social functions of texts as well as of grasping the linguistic register of any given text; Quack (2001, 168–9); David (2006 and 2010). It is noticeable that such analyses have not been properly attempted for Earlier Egyptian (i.e., Old and Middle Egyptian); see, however, Junge’s innovative overview in *LdÄ* V, 1190–3 and Junge (1985).

⁷² Recently, see Biber & Conrad (2009, 21–3).

⁷³ See now also the discussion in Gillen (2014, 41–8). For the relationship between genres and registers in Late Egyptian, see Gohy, Martin Leon, & Polis (2013).

⁷⁴ This is much in agreement with the definition of genre in Systemic Functional Linguistics. On the epistemological issues linked with the modelling of Ancient Egyptian genres, see Baines (2003, 5).

⁷⁵ See especially Ferguson (1994, 21). The situation of use or circumstances in which the text was produced is the main criterion used by Junge (2001, 19–20) in his survey of the textual genres in Late Egyptian.

features⁷⁶ that are characteristic of whole texts.⁷⁷ For example, a letter will typically contain an addressee, a main body with some content and some final salutations as well as expressions of politeness, whereas poetry is expected to be written in verses and to conform to a specific register. The notion of genre is best defined prototypically,⁷⁸ based on the extant text varieties during one period: a text is expected to have some properties that identifies it as belonging to a genre, but all the prototypical features need not occur⁷⁹ (a letter without final salutations is still a letter) and non-prototypical features may also appear (a letter might embed accounts of commodities or be written in a highly poetic register). As a practice, ‘genre’ is a zone of tension and negotiation between extra-linguistic determinations and linguistic actualizations; as such, genres are reconfigured by every single new text⁸⁰ that will, in one way or another, play with the universe of expectations of the reader. This accounts for the ‘fluid transition between individual texts’ that ‘may be combined into text clusters’ that display permeable exterior boundaries.⁸¹ Distinctions between genres are essentially defined in non-linguistic and emic⁸² terms: differences in purpose (monumental display, archiving process, actual communication), production circumstances (*Sitz im Leben*), relation between the text producer and the intended audience, etc. When switching between genres, the scribes use the written performance to achieve different goals, and the registers selected by the genres yield language choices that are functionally motivated.

§3.2. Register

The notion of register is often considered to be an overarching concept designating ‘a variety according to use’⁸³ (as a dialect is a ‘variety according to the user’) or a ‘situationally defined variety’.⁸⁴ it is therefore used ‘as a cover term for any variety associated with a particular

⁷⁶ The intelligibility of any text is hugely facilitated by the genre, for writers and readers share a set of implicit conventions. However, this may become an issue for modern scholars dealing with text languages, given the elusiveness of this tacit code, which is often far from easy to reconstruct.

⁷⁷ Nowadays, there is a general recognition that genres exist ‘just as much in non-literary spoken or written ‘texts’ as in literary texts’ (Ferguson (1994, 17)). On the problem of ‘genres’ in relation to literary pieces, especially of the Middle Kingdom, see Parkinson (2002, 32–6).

⁷⁸ See Parkinson (2002, 34): ‘A genre is not a mutually exclusive class, not ‘all (of whose) characteristic traits need be shared by every embodiment of the type’ [quoting Fowler].’

⁷⁹ In the literary sphere, an author is therefore able to play consciously with the expected features of a genre: illustrious examples like *Sinuhe* or *Wenamun* will immediately pop up in the Egyptologist’s mind, as will the literary letters of the New Kingdom (see Caminos in *LdÄ* I, 858 and III, 1066; Goldwasser (1991, 130–1) speaks of ‘embedding’ into the genre of letters), such as *P.Anastasi I* or the *Letter to Menna*.

⁸⁰ See Parkinson (2002, 34). Following, *inter alii*, Parkinson, Bickel & Mathieu (1993), as well as Genette and Todorov in the French tradition of literary criticism, this point has been underlined by Ragazzoli (2008, 99–100).

⁸¹ Moers (2010, 687).

⁸² This point is crucial, since the types of collections of texts in single manuscripts unmistakably show that the projection of our modern understanding of the genres onto the Egyptian texts, without acknowledging the cultural settings, would lead to ineffective and inadequate categorization. Parkinson (2002, 34) labels this ‘emic’ approach to the genres ‘historical and inductive’.

⁸³ See, e.g., Halliday (1978, 31), who states that register is ‘a very simple and yet powerful notion: the language that we speak or write varies according to the type of situation’. Halliday’s interest was in building a theory that attempts to uncover the principles which govern these variations: ‘what situational factors determine what linguistic features; which kind of situational factor determines which kind of selection in the linguistic system’. On this point, see §3.3 below.

⁸⁴ In the Egyptological literature, see Junge (2001, 21): ‘The conventional norm for a given situation can also be called ‘Register’.’

situational context or purpose'.⁸⁵ As a result, there is a possible confusion between genre and register, and the latter often turns out to be used in order to refer to the well-identified text types within a culture, e.g., novels, letters or debates. I would suggest here restricting the term 'register' to the description of the regular selections of *linguistic* features in the scribal repertoire in accordance with text genre. Indeed, the language of a genre will tend to display identifiable linguistic features, which are different from the language of other genres. Now three questions still hold: What kind of relation may we posit between registers and genres (§3.2. 1)? How do registers differ from one another (§3.2.2)? At which level of generality do we define registers (§3.2.3)?

§3.2.1. Relationship between genre and register

The relationship between genre and register is not seen here as a one-to-one – or biunique – relation, but rather an *n*-to-*n* relation. This modelling means that (a) several registers may be used in a single genre⁸⁶ (distinctive phrases are sometimes used as signals for the change of register, such as the so-called initiality marker *ky dd r-nty* in letters), and (b) a single register may occur in texts from different genres; e.g., there are few, if any, differences between discourse in Late Egyptian tales and direct (or reported) speech in actual letters of the same period. Fig. 4.3 captures these two dimensions:

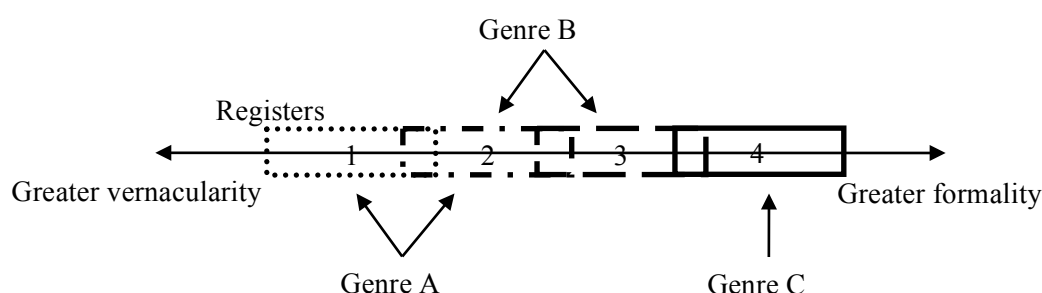


Fig. 4.3. Relationship between genres and registers

§3.2.2. Distinctions between registers

Distinctions between registers are not discrete, but are rather to be understood as a continuous space of variation.⁸⁷ Most of the time, registers differ in the characteristic *distribution* of pervasive linguistic features.⁸⁸ Therefore, the identification of a register generally depends not on the occurrence *vs* non-occurrence of an individual feature, but on the relative frequency of this feature among the various registers. As such, the use of quantitative methods is

⁸⁵ Biber (1995, 1).

⁸⁶ See especially Baines (2002, 13): 'Any literary phase exhibits a plurality of registers. For the Middle Kingdom this is clear in teachings, which include several different styles, and more clearly in narratives, where much in the *Shipwrecked Sailor* and P.Westcar may travesty oral types'. In *P.Anastasi I*, Goldwasser (1990) showed that three distinct registers may be identified based on the criterion of grammatical forms, i.e., verbal morphology in the present case: the registers of adulation, of congratulation, and of subject discourse (the latter being itself described as a 'multi-layered register' in Goldwasser (1991)).

⁸⁷ See Biber's subtitle (1995, 7–8; 31): 'register as a continuous construct'.

⁸⁸ For example, see Biber (1995, 28).

necessary.⁸⁹ Second, the distinction between registers does not reside in any single linguistic parameter, but in several parameters to be investigated at once: the co-occurrence relation among the linguistic features themselves is therefore crucial. Third, some *distinctive* linguistic features (that may be as strong as ‘register markers’) are found in some particular registers only.⁹⁰ In this case, the genre itself may be responsible for inducing or preserving specialized lexemes, idioms, or constructions in some registers.⁹¹ In Ancient Egyptian, the phenomenon of multiglossia⁹² makes the multidimensional approach to register variation especially illuminating, for a wide variety of lexical, morphological, syntactical, and constructional parameters may combine in complex ways in the conventionalization and evolution of registers.⁹³

§3.2.3. *Defining registers*

There is no level of generality in the definition of register that is better suited for linguistic analysis than another; the aim of each study leads to the selection of an *ad hoc* granularity for distinguishing registers. As an illustration, in his study of verbal morphology in Late Egyptian, Winand identifies three main registers⁹⁴ across the whole corpus (using morphological features and spelling habits), while Goldwasser acknowledges the existence of three registers in a single literary text belonging to the same corpus (see n. 86): different goals lead to different levels of generality in the selection of the relevant patterns of variation. This being said, some recurrent issues in the Egyptological scholarly literature, such as the distinction between literary and non-literary texts based on linguistic criteria,⁹⁵ are probably misleading. To put it bluntly, the epistemological impossibility of such an enterprise is the result of an over-simplified conception of the notion of literature itself and of the relation between genres and registers. Texts belonging functionally to the ‘literary sphere’ (envisioned

⁸⁹ In Fig. 4.3, this is what is meant by the overlapping registers 1-2-3-4: the registers 1 and 2 share some linguistic features that are susceptible to quantitative variation, and the same holds for the other theoretical registers. Needless to say, this schematization oversimplifies the relationship between registers themselves: registers not only overlap, but may also be embedded in one another or be embedded in one, but overlap with a second one. This has to do with the level of generality in the definition of registers; see below in §3.2.3.

⁹⁰ The situation of multiglossia in the New Kingdom is of special interest here. In the more formal registers, the emulation of the past textual tradition led to filtering the ‘innovative’ linguistic features of the scribal repertoire and to remobilizing or refunctionalizing linguistic patterns of the past (on this phenomenon, see Stauder (2013a) and Werning (2013)). This leads to observing registers with actual distinctive patterns of diaphasic variation. As a side remark, it is worth noticing that the historical knowledge of the language (see already Saussure or Labov concerning the influence on the state of the language of the individual speaker) does not seem to influence the less formal registers to a great extent: scribes seem to have had a full consciousness of the registers they were using and of the related linguistic norms; see Polis (Chapter 5, this volume).

⁹¹ In Fig. 4.3, genres A and B have one register in common (2), but genres A and C do not. This does not mean that they do not share any linguistic features (it is still the same language, after all), but that the characteristic features of their registers are always distinctive and not distributionally determined.

⁹² See n. 21 and 90. For diglossia as an extreme case of register variation, see Hudson (1994).

⁹³ See the case study on Amennakhte by Polis (Chapter 5, this volume).

⁹⁴ Winand (1992, 13). ‘Néo-égyptien complet’, a register that, in addition to the common linguistic features of classical and Late Egyptian, displays all the resources of Late Egyptian at a given time; ‘néo-égyptien mixte’ characterized as a Late Egyptian variant with additional features inherited from Earlier Egyptian; ‘néo-égyptien partiel’ that preserves some resources of Earlier Egyptian instead of the ones proper to Late Egyptian. This tripartition is similar to Junge’s (2001, 23) between ‘Late Egyptian’, ‘Medio-Late Egyptian’, and ‘Late Middle Egyptian’.

⁹⁵ Groll (1975) is among the first exponents of this method. Criticisms of this approach have already been put forward, see *inter alii* Quack (1994, 29–31).

as an overarching genre) select a significant number of different registers in the scribal repertoire,⁹⁶ ranging from the more formal ones to the ones closer to the vernacular pole. Consequently, some literary registers are close, if not identical, to the ones used in the non-literary texts, making the identification of a language of literature as a whole dubious: the language of written registers does not determine the genre to which a text belongs.

§3.3. *Relationships between participants: another aspect of the situational parameter*

Variation according to genres and registers is not the only type of variation within the diaphasic dimension. In every individual situation of written performance, the selected registers are susceptible to variation according to the role structure governing the relationships between participants (the *tenor* dimension in Halliday's (1978) perspective). As a result, some registers in which this kind of relationship matters (i.e., in the sphere of discourse where speaker and addressee interact in the speech situation) have an intrinsic and specific 'thickness' (see Fig. 4.4). By way of illustration, Allen showed that the alternation between the negation *nj* and *nn* of an infinitive clause in the letters of Heqanakht is probably not syntactically motivated.⁹⁷ Indeed, the only occurrence of *nn* is found in a formal letter from Heqanakhte to a high-ranking official, which prompted the writer to use more formal and more levelled parts of the register typical to letters. This points to the very existence of – at least individually, but most expectedly socially – constructed language ideologies.⁹⁸ Crucially, this scribal consciousness of the possible variations in terms of formality and conventionalization⁹⁹ among registers according to the situation of use has had an unquestionable impact on language change in pre-Demotic Egyptian, as recorded in the written documentation.

§4. *Deir el-Medina: Contextualizing a text community*

In this last section, I will focus on the community of Deir el-Medina in order to describe the effects that this specific socio-cultural environment had on its written productions in terms of language variation. The aim is not to suggest new insights about the social history of the village itself,¹⁰⁰ but – elaborating on previous studies – to evaluate the impact that the quite unique configuration of this community might have had on the shared scribal repertoire shaped by education and configured by experience.

Deir el-Medina is an isolated village¹⁰¹ on the West bank of Thebes (modern Luxor) located on the border with the desert in a small valley behind the hill of Gurnet Mura'i. The

⁹⁶ On the continuum between the literary and documentary registers in Ancient Egyptian, see the case study on cleft-sentences presented in Vernus (1987, 175–81).

⁹⁷ Allen (1994, 9–10).

⁹⁸ Accessible through indexical markers of various kinds, see, e.g., Silverstein (1992).

⁹⁹ One has to stress that the actual situation of the written performance may have an impact both on the level of formality (specific selections in the repertoire for a given register) and on the level of conventionalization (e.g., regularities at the graphemic, morphological and constructional levels).

¹⁰⁰ A comprehensive synthesis of the social status of the members of this community is still lacking. Based on the evidence at our disposal, it seems, however, quite clear that, between the Thutmoside and the Late Ramesside periods, it evolves significantly in the direction of an increasing social prominence of its members, not least at the level of an individual's self-representation, who were apparently increasingly involved in official matters unrelated to the business of the Tomb itself.

¹⁰¹ The classical references are Černý (³2004) and Valbelle (1985). A systematic bibliography compiled by the Leiden team is available online, see <http://www.leidenuniv.nl/nino/dmd/dmd.html>.

texts written by the artisans who lived in this settlement – whose main task was to build the royal tombs during the New Kingdom (from the 18th to 20th dynasty; ca. 1500–1050 BCE) – make it *a priori* a favourable site for investigating the conditions of written performance in Ancient Egypt and their influences on the language preserved in the documentation for at least two reasons.

The quantity of available linguistic data is sizeable, partly thanks to the fact that the site is located in the mountain, i.e., far from the Nile floods, and was abandoned sometime during the reign of Ramesses IX (ca. 1115 BCE) when the community moved away¹⁰² from the village, mainly because work had stopped,¹⁰³ and left behind a mass of written material. According to Gasse,¹⁰⁴ Černý and Posener estimated that ca. 15,000 ostraca (potsherds or limestone flakes) originating from Deir el-Medina are now kept at the French Archaeological Institute in Cairo (IFAO), among which there are ca. 7000 (copies of) so-called literary texts and ca. 8000 ‘non-literary’ texts. To this number, one must add a considerable number of documents coming from Deir el-Medina¹⁰⁵ that are scattered in Egyptological collections all over the world (Berlin, Brussels, Cairo, Chicago, Florence, London, Oxford, Paris, Turin, etc.): 15,000 non-literary ostraca might have been excavated in total.¹⁰⁶ If we combine this estimate with the number of papyri coming from this site (ca. 300 are published), a proper linguistic contextualization is a viable project for the registers of almost every genre: each text may be studied as representative of a group, in the context of other surviving texts.

This wealth of material also gives access to invaluable metadata of the kind that is too often lacking in historical sociolinguistics (and unparalleled in Ancient Egypt, cf. §1.2):¹⁰⁷ ‘The mass of documentation uncovered both in the environs of the village and from the royal work sites affords a detailed insight into the cultural, political and economic identity [...], in addition to information concerning the working techniques and bureaucratic organisation employed by the ancient craftsmen’.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, personal data about the official curriculum of individuals is available through the titles they bear as well as the functions they occupy in

¹⁰² The *opinion communis* is that the crew moved nearby to the safer funerary temple of Medinet Habu (see, e.g., Valbelle (1985, 219)), but, except from the scribes Dhutmose and his son Butehamun, ‘there is no evidence at all that the workmen ever lived within the Medinet Habu *temenos*’ (Haring (2006, 111)). It has been inferred from the putative place of discovery of a great number of late Ramesside papyri (see Demarée (2008, 46)) that many inhabitants of the Theban West Bank found refuge in the Medinet Habu temple that had turned into some kind of fortress.

¹⁰³ See Demarée (2008, 51).

¹⁰⁴ See Gasse (1992, 51). See now the online inventory, <http://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/archives/ostraca/>.

¹⁰⁵ This body of evidence does not only originate from the settlement of Deir el-Medina itself, but may also come from various places on the West Bank of the Nile in which the crew was active at some point: the Valley of the Kings, the Valley of the Queens, the Tombs of the Nobles, and the funerary temples of Thutmose IV, Ramesses II, Ramesses III, etc.

¹⁰⁶ The estimation of 20,000 non-literary ostraca put forward in the ‘Einführung’ of the Deir el-Medineh Online website (<http://dem-online.gwi.uni-muenchen.de/einfuehrung.php>) is certainly too optimistic. Based on the number of IFAO ostraca and on the proportion of documentary ostraca in the Deir el-Medina Database that are kept in other collections, the number of usable ostraca coming from Deir el-Medina is probably closer to 13,000–15,000; I am indebted to Ben Haring’s expertise on this topic. This approximate figure is in agreement with Mathieu (2003, 199), who refines Gasse’s view (see n. 104): ‘on recense environ 7,400 ostraca dits ‘littéraires’, par opposition aux ‘documentaires’, sur les 13,000 inventoriés’.

¹⁰⁷ As succinctly noted by Loprieno (2006, 170).

¹⁰⁸ Davies (1999, XVIII).

the extant documents and it is therefore possible to reconstruct accurate prosopographies and extensive genealogical lineage.¹⁰⁹

However, this rather optimistic picture concerning the quantity and quality of (meta)data at our disposal is counterbalanced by two factors. Up until now, only a small part of the texts related to Deir el-Medina has been made available through publication. Using the database of the Leiden team (see n. 101), it appears that no more than 3,344 ostraca and 308 papyri have been published so far; there is still a long way to go in this area and, even if new documents are published each year,¹¹⁰ decades will be needed to make the full range of documentary material accessible.

In the framework of this study, a more crucial issue is the problematic matching between the dependent linguistic variables that are found in the documents and the independent social variables when one tries to reach an optimum degree of precision, i.e. to connect a text with a scribe. Even if we do have a lot of metadata, we do not have much *personalized* data. Here and there, it is possible to correlate the two dimensions with some precision. The documents written by Qenhirkhopshef may be a good illustration of the methodological possibilities and limitations in terms of linguistic studies. This prominent member of the Deir el-Medina community probably occupied the office of ‘scribe of the Tomb’ for more than 50 years (year 40 of Ramesses II to year 1 of Siptah; ca. 1240–1190 BCE¹¹¹) and was most interested in matters ‘concerning the written word, lexicography, the development of language, literature and historiography’,¹¹² which would make his writings – easy to single out thanks to his rather unique cursive handwriting¹¹³ – especially worth studying. However, despite such a long tenure, no more than 30 extant documents can be attributed to him with any certainty: ‘this is disappointingly little’.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, if all the documents are good sources for the examination of scribal practices¹¹⁵ (use of drafts, etc.), only five of them can really be exploited linguistically,¹¹⁶ the rest being administrative texts dealing with things such as

¹⁰⁹ Among the general studies, see, e.g., Černý (2004), Bierbrier (1975), and Davies (1999).

¹¹⁰ In this domain, Grandet’s rhythm of publication for the IFAO documentary texts is admirable; see Grandet (2000, 2003, 2006, and 2010).

¹¹¹ See Černý (2004, 331), with emendations in Davies (1999, 84–6).

¹¹² Davies (1999, 86). Qenhirkhopshef commissioned a cryptographic inscription for a limestone funerary headrest (BM EA 63783 = *KRI* VII, 200; picture in Andreu (2002, 133)), wrote down onomastic lists (bureaucratic titles beginning with the grapheme *hry* ‘superior’ = O. Cairo 25760 [*KRI* III, 642–3]; a list of ten kings of the 18th and 19th dynasties = O. Cairo GC 25646, see Sauneron (1951, 46–9)), possessed a list of the sons of Ramesses II (O. Carnarvon ‘300 PP’, r^o [*KRI* IV, 188,9]; for Černý (2004, 295), the hand of the recto ‘does not seem to be the same as that of the verso’ that is definitely written by Qenhirkhopshef), is shown adorning the cartouches of eighteen different kings and queens on the offering table in Marseilles (n^o 204, see *PM I*², 743; see also another offering table of our scribe *ibid.* [*KRI* III, 640,11–3] mentioning the *šms.w Hr* ‘companion of Horus’, i.e., the Pharaoh of the past, cf. Vernus (2002, 64)); see McDowell (1992, 96–7), who adds to this list the *Ritual of Amenhotep* of which his archive (see n. 141) contains a copy (P.Chester Beatty IX, r^o 7,5–8,9 & r^o 12,11–13; cf. Gardiner (1935, I, 90 and 95, II, pls. 53 and 55). Furthermore, he made two copies of the beginning of the *Battle of Qadesh* based on the Ramesseum inscription (P.Chester Beatty III v^o = P.BM EA 10683), cf. Gardiner (1935, pl. 9–10a) and the comments in Lesko (1994, 133–8). This papyrus also contains the notorious *Dream-Book* that for some time was among his possession; see Sauneron (1959b).

¹¹³ Gardiner (1935, 23) asserts that: ‘The writing of kenhikhopshef [*sic*] is undoubtedly the most cursive and least legible of all the scripts that have survived from the Nineteenth Dynasty’; Sauneron (1959, XVIII and n. 7) famously spoke of an ‘enfant terrible du hiératique’; see also Černý (2004, 332) and Vernus (2002, 62).

¹¹⁴ Donker van Heel (2003).

¹¹⁵ List and detailed discussion in Donker van Heel (2003, 41–8).

¹¹⁶ A note about a special event (O.Cairo CG 25552), a list of workmen (O.Carnarvon ‘300 PP’), two drafts of letters to viziers (O.Cairo CG 25832 and P.Chester Beatty III v^o) and the beginning of a third letter (O.Cairo CG

lamps used, labour absences and progress of work in the Tomb, deliveries of commodities, accounts, etc. Given the scarcity of material, a variationist study of the documents he wrote is not the most promising avenue of investigation.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, if one broadens the scope to the entire scribal network of his time and takes into account the written production of the other members of the community, a variationist approach becomes much more interesting.

Most of the time, though, such a matching is difficult, if not impossible, in the present state of affairs. The identification of scribes relies on convergent criteria such as (a) palaeography¹¹⁸ (but we have to acknowledge the fact that scribes and authors are not always one and a single individual¹¹⁹), (b) internal evidence (usually combining prosopographical information with the context of production; e.g., a literate person figuring among the witnesses of a judicial case might be the scribe), and (c) linguistic features.¹²⁰

Yet, these remarks do not contradict the fact that the community of Deir el-Medina is a remarkable place for socio-historical approaches to variation. In fact, it may be, in many respects, better suited for such analyses than many other places later in time, at least down to the Middle Ages. If one takes the scale of individuation of historical linguistic data established by Bergs:¹²¹

1. Data that is completely ‘un-social’ (scribes unknown; social context cannot be established).

25807), as well as a copy of a magic spell (known by two other ostraca) against a demon *shkk* that he filled in a letter by a fan-bearer and vizier addressed to him (P.BM EA 10731 [KRI IV, 181–2], see Černý (2004, 335–6)).

¹¹⁷ Even in the case of the letters, we may expect the situational parameter (i.e., the relationship between participants) to be neutralized: all of them are drafts or model letters to (or from) high-ranking officials (regarding the socially motivated distribution of the introductory formulae in letters from the Theban Necropolis, see Haring (2009)). Nevertheless, some questions related to Qenhirkhopshef’s distinct habits as a copyist of literary texts (including the process of transposition from hieroglyphic to hieratic script) and as a scribe would be worth further investigation. In this respect, the examination of the idiosyncrasies found in the texts copied by a single scribe, like Ennene (*P.D’Orbiney*, *P.Anastasi* IV, VI, VII, and *P.Sallier* II), Pabasa (*P.Anastasi* III, *P.Koller*), Pentaweret (*P.Sallier* I), Pawehem (*P.Bologna* 1094) or Wentaiamun (*P.Lansing*; see Moers (2001)) would definitely be fruitful; on ‘signed’ papyri, see Quirke (1996, 382); Goelet (2008, 104); and Dorn (2009, 75).

¹¹⁸ The identification of Ramesside hands is a tricky issue and a field that is still very much in its infancy. Concerning the identification of handwritings, see the pessimistic remarks in Janssen (1987), who comments on the possibility of distinguishing the handwriting of various scribes by looking at the most frequent graphemes and by observing the statistical distribution (Janssen 1994, 96, ‘How difficult it is to recognize an individual hand has recently been demonstrated by Gasse (see 1992, 56–70 esp. n. 27)”). However, Baines & Eyre (1983, 87) argue that ‘Few texts reveal their authorship through internal evidence, so that progress would come only from a palaeography of individual hands’. For further literature on the topic and promising avenue for future research, see Polis (Chapter 5, this volume, n. 50–53).

¹¹⁹ On dictation in pre-Demotic Egyptian, see, e.g., Baines & Eyre (1983, 87) and Sweeney (1994, 277). Using internal evidence (requests for letters in the actual handwriting of a given scribe), Sweeney rightly points out that the scribes themselves did not always write the letters they sent. In the case of literary texts and school exercises (‘miscellanies’), two good indications that the texts have been copied are: (a) the presence of a colophon, and (b) the mention of the date of copying. For colophons in school exercises, see McDowell (2000, 223), Luiselli (2003), Lenzo Marchese (2004, 365); in its fullest form, a colophon reads ‘It has come well and in peace, for A [the teacher], his assistant B.’ In the case of copies, a recent typology of the kinds of variation of the written performance for which the copyists are responsible is still lacking in the Egyptological literature, see, however, Burkard (1977) and the literature quoted by Baines (2002, 26 n. 129–30).

¹²⁰ Cf. Sweeney’s (1994) identification of idiolectal features in the *Late Ramesside Letters*; see n. 7.

¹²¹ Bergs (2005, 51).

2. Data can be ascribed to certain groups or locales (social context can only be established at some macro-level, but social data on the groups and/or locales is available).
3. Data can be ascribed to single scribes, whose social data are more or less available.

one observes that the correlation between dependent linguistic variables and independent social data oscillates generally between stages 2 and 3 for Deir el-Medina, which is exceptional for a cluster of writers dating back more than three millennia.

Furthermore, in pre-Demotic Egyptian, the community of Deir el-Medina is undoubtedly the best place to study the diaphasic dimension of variation.¹²² On top of the advantages cited above, it is worth noting that two factors led to a relative increase of variation – or destandardization¹²³ – of the scribal repertoire in this community.

First, during the New Kingdom, i.e., the period of activity of the craftsmen of Deir el-Medina, a movement of individualization, which began during the First Intermediate Period (some five hundred years before) and went top-down in Ancient Egyptian society,¹²⁴ emerges clearly in the documentation through the affirmation and self-promotion of personal agentivity in numerous contexts.¹²⁵ This is found in, e.g., the religious sphere (with an increase in the manifestations of personal piety¹²⁶), the artistic domain (where several hands and actual artists' signatures of artist are documented¹²⁷), and the literary realm (with non-fictional authorships¹²⁸). At a linguistic level, this personal agentivity sometimes led to the relaxation of the norms attached to written registers. As a matter of fact, in this specific socio-cultural setting, an increasing (and emulative) freedom of composition among the literate is anything but surprising. In this respect, the extension of *belles lettres* for that time is symptomatic, for it involves the creation of new literary genres (especially linked to fictional emotional landscapes, such as literary letters, love letters and songs,¹²⁹ lyric poetry, fables, hymns to the City, etc.) and the authorization of registers previously excluded from literary and sacralised productions.¹³⁰ In spite of all this, it seems, however, that the above-mentioned

¹²² In the same vein, see Loprieno (2006, 168).

¹²³ Following Grossman (2011), the notion of destandardization may be conceptualized as a weakening of the norm resulting in an increase in linguistic heterogeneity, in other words, as a relaxation of the selections in the scribal repertoire usually conditioned by situational constraints. This presupposes that individual scribes wish to (and may actually) exploit parts of the repertoire that are not parts of the written registers usually associated with a genre.

¹²⁴ Recently, see Ragazzoli (2010, 167) with previous literature.

¹²⁵ In general, see Vernus (1995). Egyptologists, perhaps influenced by the cultural context of production, generally accepted the anonymity of the works they studied.

¹²⁶ See, e.g., Assmann (1997) and Vernus (2003), with previous literature, and Luiselli (2011).

¹²⁷ See Keller (1984, 2003).

¹²⁸ See, e.g., Assmann (1991, 307) who speaks of an 'Individualisierung der literarischen Überlieferung in ,Werke' und ,Autoren' and the case study on Amennakhte in Polis (Chapter 5, this volume). Correlatively, this societal evolution is reflected in the literature itself with scribes and middle-class people becoming prominent figures, see, e.g., Ragazzoli (2010).

¹²⁹ See Mathieu (2003, 126–7). On love songs, see, e.g., Mathieu (2008). On Butehamon's famous letter to his departed wife (O.Louvre 698), see Goldwasser (1995, 191).

¹³⁰ On the relationship between language and literary genres during the New Kingdom and the artificial caesura of the Amarna Period, i.e., a caesura largely projected on the written material by the Egyptologists themselves based on historical data, see Baines (2002, 14).

relative emancipation from the conventionalized pole did not result in a similar increase of linguistic variation in all the registers¹³¹ of the written performance in Deir el-Medina.

Second, as a result of the specialized nature of the work in digging and decorating tombs,¹³² which made the workmen familiar with several types of written performance, the level of literacy in the village was undoubtedly higher¹³³ than the average one per cent of the population in the country as a whole (see above §2.2). According to a first estimate, between five and 7.5 per cent of the entire community (25–30 per cent of the male personnel¹³⁴) was literate, i.e., more than five times the global rate. Janssen¹³⁵ goes as far as to state that, if one includes also semi-literates, i.e., people having passive competence sufficient to recognize hieratic signs and to understand the contents of a relatively simple text, the number comprised virtually the entire adult male population. In fact, he provides evidence showing that several ordinary workmen were definitely literate¹³⁶ (and called themselves *sš* ‘scribe’ when writing ostraca or graffiti, although they were definitely not professional scribes or draughtsmen¹³⁷). These figures depend heavily on the very definition of literacy and literates in ancient societies,¹³⁸ but it appears reasonable to assume that most of the members of the community (including several women) had some knowledge of the written language.¹³⁹ The degree of literacy is likely to have been rather varied depending on the domain of specialization of the members of the community. It was probably rather low for the less qualified of the

¹³¹ See Loprieno (2006, 167): ‘The main problem we are facing in dealing with linguistic variety in Deir el-Medina material is the highly conventional nature of Egyptian writing altogether. This highly conventional character of Egyptian writing is less pronounced in the second portion of the linguistic history of Egyptian, i.e. in the Late Egyptian language we know from the vast majority of Deir el-Medina documents, but infinitely more invasive than the levels of intrusion of extralinguistic conventions we are used to in our own linguistic and graphic experience’.

¹³² As noted by Davies (1999, XVIII).

¹³³ ‘The community is likely to have been one of the most literate of all in relation to its social status’ (Baines & Eyre 1983, 86 and 90). See also Mathieu (2002, 219): ‘la petite communauté de Deir el-Médineh n’est pas représentative de l’ensemble de la société égyptienne, puisque le pourcentage de lettrés, sachant lire *et* écrire, y était nettement supérieur’.

¹³⁴ Baines & Eyre (1983).

¹³⁵ Janssen (1992, 82).

¹³⁶ See, e.g., the case of *M33-nhtw=f* presented in Dorn (2006).

¹³⁷ Regarding the honorary title *sš*, indicating merely that its bearer was skilled in writing, see Janssen (1982, 149).

¹³⁸ See the chart of potential literacy in Der Manuelian (1999, 286) who studied some erasures from the Amarna Period in this perspective, elaborating *inter alia* on the different possible audiences for discrete sections of a scene or image in Egyptian art, as highlighted by Bryan (1996). One should not overestimate anachronistically the importance of written practices and should take care not to project it directly onto ancient societies in general and onto the Deir el-Medina community’s daily life in particular. Between the 18th and the 20th dynasties, the situation underwent important changes in the direction of an increase of the use of written records; see especially Haring (2006, 107). This presumably reflects an increase in the degree of literacy in the community and, probably, an evolution of the social status of its members (cf. the presence of locally based necropolis scribes). Based on ‘mistakes’ in administrative documents and refusing to accept ‘sheer incompetence’ as a satisfactory answer, Janssen (2005, 157) argues that ‘while the community of Deir el-Medina as a whole may have had a higher level of literacy than others, it was not yet far removed from the oral tradition of recording. ... [T]he whole administration rested still on a predominantly oral practice’. On this question, see already Haring (2003a and 2003b) who speaks of ‘oral village culture’ and describes (2006) the intensification of the use of writing in Deir el-Medina during the Ramesside period.

¹³⁹ For McDowell (1999, 4) and Haring (2006, 110), ‘literacy, full or partial, reached a rate of 40% in the Twentieth Dynasty’.

workmen,¹⁴⁰ but given the diversity of the genres attested in funerary contexts and the kinds of texts used for teaching, a good mastery of all the written registers, including the more formal ones,¹⁴¹ is definitely to be assumed for the scribes and, presumably, for the chief draughtsmen as well. Moreover, the degree of literacy within the community is likely to have been subject to important diachronic change, as reflected in the documentation by the evolution of scribal activity.¹⁴² In this respect, the label ‘contingent literacy’ coined by Loprieno¹⁴³ is useful for the situation in Deir el-Medina.

The impact of these observations on the linguistic variation found in the multiglossic scribal repertoire may be sketched as follows:

- (a) Few people had an active knowledge of the more formal registers,¹⁴⁴ which were based on a mimetic use and remobilization of the language of the past. If we exclude copies¹⁴⁵ of earlier literary texts, as well as of the teaching oriented *Kemyt* (which is written in columns in a distinctive style evoking early Middle Egyptian cursive; the oldest manuscript dates back to the end of the 12th dynasty), most of the texts making use of these registers are monumental inscriptions (especially in tombs with the so-called *Books of the Netherworld*) or funerary texts on papyri (such as the *Book of the Dead* or the *Opening of the Mouth Ritual*, which use different registers, but display very few variations). The norm attached to these registers remained indisputably strong during the New Kingdom,¹⁴⁶ as well as in the later productions written in *Égyptien de tradition*.
- (b) A slight increase of variation is documented in the literary registers of the so-called *Miscellanies* (Hagen 2006), as well as in the registers of some other hymns to gods and royal eulogies on papyri and ostraca. The variation within this category is, however, rather due to the fact that various genres, mobilizing several registers, belong to this category than to a significant decrease in conventionalization (basically, as far as one can see, the village seems ‘to have shared an Egypt-wide idea of the educated man’¹⁴⁷).

¹⁴⁰ See Davies’s (1999, XIX) comment concerning the innumerable graffiti throughout the Theban necropolis. Different strategies were developed in order to allow semi-literates or illiterates to take part in administrative matters. In the context of Deir el-Medina, the use of the so-called ‘workmen’s marks’ deserves a special mention, see Haring & Kaper (2009) as well as the contributions of Haring, Killen & Weiss (2009) and Fronczak & Rzepka (2009). In a broader context, for a discussion of sealing practices as one of these strategies, see Pantalacci (1996) and Smith (2001).

¹⁴¹ On this point, see Baines & Eyre (1983, 88), who state that the ‘level of literate culture of the scribal elite was surprisingly high’. The Chester Beatty collection of papyri is an excellent illustration of this point; on this collection and its history, see Pestman (1982), Bickel & Mathieu (1993, 103), and Demarée (2008, 47).

¹⁴² See n. 138.

¹⁴³ Loprieno (2006, 167).

¹⁴⁴ Baines (2002, 17): ‘who could exploit the stream of tradition were a small subset of the literate group, at Deir el-Medina perhaps consisting of the scribes and a couple of others’. The author subsequently argues, based on the Late Period Elephantine papyri, among others, that the knowledge of Classical Egyptian was probably more widespread in proper administrative centres and temples. In any case, as has been demonstrated *inter alii* by Werning (2013), the ‘profound philological and linguistic competence of certain Egyptian literates’ during the New Kingdom is beyond any doubt.

¹⁴⁵ In strong contrast with spoken performance, written performance allows scribes to interact with each other over great temporal distance, through the copying of texts. Most of the variations that result from the copying of texts are intra-textual: traces of modernizations (including re-interpretations) or misunderstandings of the model. This affects mostly the graphemic and lexical levels, but morpho-syntactic variations are far from infrequent.

¹⁴⁶ On the ‘power’ of Classical Egyptian, see Baines (2002, 11).

¹⁴⁷ McDowell (2000, 231).

- (c) The less formal registers of the texts that the community was producing for daily-life purposes, e.g., administrative texts, judicial notes, and the contents of letters, were certainly familiar to a larger part of the community. The variation found therein is consequently higher and personal habits may be identified at different levels.

In the framework of Deir el-Medina, Fig. 4.2 may therefore be refined in order to account for the different levels of conventionalization according to registers: the entire scribal repertoire is not affected in the same way by the increase of variation (Fig. 4.4).

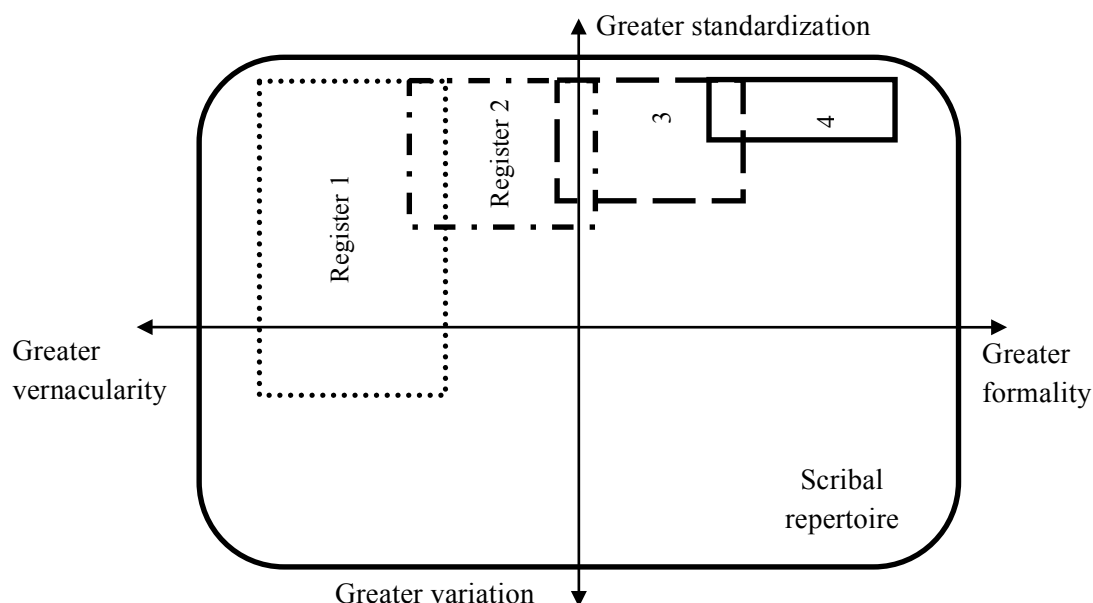


Fig. 4.4. Degree of variation in the scribal repertoire according to registers

This being said, even in the less formal registers, one should not overestimate nor overemphasize the actuality of variation,¹⁴⁸ for the textual material shows that it actually remained quite limited. The very nature of this community can contribute to explain this fact. As a (quite isolated) social location, the community of Deir el-Medina may not only be envisioned as a microcosm of the wider Egyptian society. The inhabitants most likely reinterpreted the national idealization of the registers¹⁴⁹ (see §1.1) through ‘locally constructed language ideologies’.¹⁵⁰

In order to describe this phenomenon and to refine somewhat the description of the Deir el-Medina ‘scribal network’,¹⁵¹ the heuristic of ‘social network analysis’ may be applied.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ However, some variations in the administrative habits of the scribes (how they use drafts, etc.) appear to be quite regular and identifiable; see Donker van Heel (2003).

¹⁴⁹ It is important to note here that the education in Deir el-Medina was (at least partly) local, even though the very existence of a ‘school’ in the modern sense of the term may be doubted, a master-to-apprentice teaching relationship being probably more accurate. See Baines & Eyre (1983, 88): ‘The large number of writing and drawing exercises found at Deir el-Medina shows that draughtsmanship and literacy were taught locally’, and McDowell (2000, 230): ‘[...] skilled members of the gang were entitled to an assistant to whom they could then offer a proper scribal education’.

¹⁵⁰ Milroy (2004).

¹⁵¹ To the best of my knowledge, the concept was introduced into the Egyptological literature in Reiche (2004).

Thanks to the metadata at our disposal, the village of the tomb builders may be described in terms of both structural and interactional components. These two components, i.e., the quantity and the quality of the links between individuals, play a crucial role ‘in accounting for the attitudes and behaviour of a given network participant’¹⁵³ and in defining the global standpoint of the community towards linguistic conventions.

In terms of structural components,¹⁵⁴ the density of the network, i.e., the number of actual links divided by the number of potential links, is high, if not maximal. We are indeed dealing with a territory-based cluster, with the number of inhabitants varying with time between ca. 100 and 400 (and probably never exceeding 630, if one includes the servants¹⁵⁵), which makes it plausible that any member of the community had some interaction with all the other members of the community at some point. This is even truer if we consider only the subgroup of literates actually producing written material.

As for interactional components, they can be described as follows:

- The transactional content is massive and regular, both in professional and personal matters.
- The multiplexity of relationships, i.e., the diversity of social functions that any two participants fulfil in their relationship, is generalized. The village of Deir el-Medina was a place for working and living, which inevitably led to:
 - Hierarchical relationships in official business.
 - Ties of kinship and friendship¹⁵⁶ (occasionally of enmity) in the immediate neighbourhood.
 - Acquaintances and voluntary associations in the ‘informal workshop’, i.e., when manufacturing artefacts together for the outside world.¹⁵⁷
 - Relationships with the outside world.¹⁵⁸
- The types of reciprocity in relationships and related linguistic behaviours are consequently susceptible to extreme diversity.

If we use the above-mentioned criteria in order to situate Deir el-Medina on a network strength scale,¹⁵⁹ the community as a whole may be considered as a close-knit multiplex network. Such a close-knit network assuredly influenced the writings of the scribal network (as well as the related language ideology) in generating uniform network norms.¹⁶⁰ In principle, uniform network norms (that vary according to registers) are not to be mistaken for

¹⁵² For a comprehensive presentation of the ideas, principles and methods underlying and constituting social network analysis in relation to language variation and language change, see Bergs (2005, 22–58).

¹⁵³ Bergs (2005, 27).

¹⁵⁴ The quick overview suggested here does not take into account external links between the administrative and religious centres of the Theban area and other parts of the country (e.g., the travels of members in places ranging from Memphis to Lower Nubia) that are attested in the documents. Note that the issues related to the centrality of given individuals and to clusters or cliques (defined as cohesive sub-groups within the network) have been left almost entirely untouched and remain open to further investigation.

¹⁵⁵ See e.g. Toivari-Viitala (2001, 4–5) with earlier literature.

¹⁵⁶ See the case study in Sweeney (1998).

¹⁵⁷ See especially Cooney (2006).

¹⁵⁸ See especially McDowell (1994).

¹⁵⁹ On this concept, see Milroy (1987, 142).

¹⁶⁰ See already Milroy & Milroy (1985).

a ‘standard variety’: in the case of Deir el-Medina, this might have led to a proper *sociolect*,¹⁶¹ a language constituted of levelled registers whose written conventions differ in several ways (i.e., at the graphemic, lexical, and morpho-syntactic levels) from other varieties of the same language. Such a sociolect is unfortunately hardly identifiable in the documentation originating from Deir el-Medina, for at least two reasons. First, we do not have any proper *tertium comparationis*: the geographic distribution of the Late Egyptian corpus (and especially of the registers belonging to the lower part of the formality scale) is highly uneven and our knowledge of non-literary Late Egyptian is predominantly based on the documents emanating from this very community (more than 90 per cent of the extant texts). In these conditions, evaluating the differences between a possible Deir el-Medina sociolect and other varieties during the New Kingdom is a perilous task, for it usually involves an argument from silence. Second, the shared conception of language registers at the level of the country (see §1.1) makes variation between the linguistic material produced within the community and those coming from other places elusive: the local scribal network rather seems to have sustained (or reinforced) the common norm of the state than to have developed self-defined and accepted conventions for its written productions. After all, the social role and importance of the Deir el-Medina community in attending to the post-mortem destiny of the Kings definitely points in the same direction.

§5. *A word in conclusion*

In this chapter, I examined the various types of extra-linguistic factors that can be responsible for linguistic variation in Ancient Egyptian texts from pre-Demotic times. It has been observed that, in this socio-cultural environment, variations brought about by the users (geographical origin and social status of the scribes) are few, whereas the context of use has a deep impact on the linguistic registers that scribes could use and brings about significant variation across text types. Based on the more detailed discussion of the written production of the Deir el-Medina community, one can assert that, even in the framework of this highly literate scribal network of the Ramesside period, the degree of conventionalization of the various registers is significant. As such, we mostly have access to highly levelled registers for all of the genres attested. Keeping these observations in mind (and the related methodological issues), there is, however, little doubt that acknowledging the external dimensions of variation in their complexity should always go hand in hand with examining language-internal factors when dealing with linguistic phenomena in Ancient Egyptian. This is an epistemological requisite for any sound description of the diachronic evolution of this language.

¹⁶¹ On this point, see Sweeney (1994, 317 n. 533) on the corpus of the *Late Ramesside Letters*.